THE RISE OF RACIALISTIC THINKING IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

BY

DONALD FRED TINGLEY

B.S., Eastern Illinois State College, 1947

A.M., University of Illinois, 1948

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN HISTORY IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1952

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Racialism has been, and remains, one of the gravest problems which has faced the United States. This study is an attempt to determine whence this group of ideas came and how they were used. Racialism seems a very ancient thing. In its peculiar modern form, however, it is of relatively recent origin. Distinctions between groups of men, and prejudices based upon them have always existed. Such divisions can be based upon an almost infinite variety of distinctions—political, economic, religious, cultural, and the rest.

Racialism, though a psuedo-scientific way of thinking, comes into being only when a scientific way of thinking has become so influential that an imitation of it carries widespread conviction. Modern racialism, then, is distinguished from earlier forms of group prejudice because it is rooted in biological determinism. It assumes that religious and cultural differences—that is to say, differences which occur as a result of education in the broadest sense—are not the fundamental differences between men. Behind them, to the racialist, lie permanent, hereditary, and biological characteristics which cannot be erased, which mark all members of the biologically related group, and which determine and limit the capacity which every member of such a group may possess of absorbing and assimilating the cultural and intellectual influences to which he may be exposed. The rise of this concept in American thought is the subject of the present study.

As racialism emerged, principally in the Nineteenth Century, it drew to itself many older forms of group prejudice, preserving their emotional potency, but providing them with a new and superficially more persuasive ra-

tionale. It gathered up all the ancient arguments for the superiority of one group over another, gave a new twist to them, and sent them forth again, garbed in a psuedo-scientific language more plausible to Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century ears than the older rationalizations could hope to be.

Racialism in America could draw upon a vast reservoir of group prejudice, part of it transmitted as an ellement in the cultural heritage of Western thought, part of it derived from first-hand contact in the New World with groups of men completely different in custom and appearance. Out of Western cultural heritage American racialism drew the Graeco-Roman idea of the "barbarian" and the Hebraic tradition of a chosen race. In England the tradition of Germanic superiority, inaugurated by Tacitus, was developed into a consciousness of being Anglo-Saxon. It was held that personal freedom and liberty were peculiarly Anglo-Saxon traits in contrast to Norman tyranny. From their proximity to the Negro and the Indian in the New World the English colonists built up a contempt for the one because he was a slave and a hatred for the other because of his alleged cruelty. Rarely were these dislikes stated in racial terms. The usual idea expressed about the the Indian, for example, was that he was different because he had sold his soul to the Devil. This cannot be considered racial because presumably if he was reclaimed to Christianity his deficiencies would disappear.

One of the necessary backgrounds of racialism is a scientific train of thought which, added to hatred of a group, can produce racialism in the modern sense. The Enlightenment provided this element in the biological classification of such men as Linnaeus, Buffon, Cuvier, and Blumenbach. The Enlightenment also contributed other ideas which temporarily impeded the rise of racialism.

One of these ideas was that of the Noble Savage in which it was conceived that a man in a state of nature, such as the American Indian, would be the perfect man, unspoiled by civilization. The other idea, found enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence, was that all men are created equal. Obviously neither of these ideas were fertile sources of racialism and before a true racialism could be produced the principles of the Enlightenment had to be renounced or restated.

One of the most potent sources of racialistic thinking in the United States in the Nineteenth Century came from the defense of slavery by Southerners in the three decades preceding the Civil War. Jefferson and his contemporaries, for the most part representatives of the Enlightenment, realized the inconsistency of their slaveholding and the principles they had stated in the Declaration of Independence. Consequently they repudiated slavery as an institution although in some cases they had doubts about the equality of the Negro. About the beginning of the Nineteenth Century a new generation of men came to the fore—the generation of Calhoun rather than that of Jefferson. Those of this generation who lived in the South were to bring about the almost complete rejection of the political philosophy of the Enlightenment and the acceptance of a doctrine of racialism as vigorous as any the world has known. Like the generation of Jefferson these men realized the inconsistency of the political theory of equality and slaveholding but they rejected the equalitarian political theory of the Enlightenment and built a new one based on the idea of inequality. Society was not to be a partnership of equals. Instead the superior or white race was to govern the inferior blacks in a paternalistic slave economy.

These ideas were hastened by the rise of the militant abolitionism of such men as William Lloyd Garrison, who

founded **The Liberator** in 1831. Another reason for the rather sudden change from an apology for slavery to a positive defense of the institution was the slave revolts which reached a peak with the Nat Turner rebellion in Virginia in 1831. For the most part the defense of slavery can be said to begin with that year. One of the major arguments used in the defense of slavery was that the Negro was permanently inferior to the white man and that his lot was better under slavery than as a free man. The Negro was said to be inferior both mentally and physically. The reason given for this inferiority was usually that he was made so by God because of the sin of Ham, who was believed to be the progenitor of the Negro race. Others, basing their theory on the ideas of Louis Agassiz, believed that the Negro was the product of a special act of creation by God.

The assertion that one race of men is inferior implies that another is superior. In addition to the idea that the colored races were inferior it was also declared that some branches of the white race are superior to others. Using the Hebraic tradition of the chosen race and the classical writings of the English romantic historians concerning Anglo-Saxon superiority, various nationalistic groups in the United States evolved an elaborate thesis of Anglo-Saxon superiority. This doctrine was especially used to further the imperialistic urge of the United States at the time of the Mexican War and to some extent as an argument against immigration, although the latter was not yet particularly important.

It was argued that the Anglo-Saxons were superior to other races, hence they would make better use of land than the inferior groups so they were justified in taking the land of the latter. The argument was used to justify acquisition of territory from the Mexicans by military conquest and from the Indians who were also judged in-

ferior in some quarters. The aggressiveness of the Anglo-Saxon was accounted one of his virtues.

These are the racialistic ideas which had permeated the thinking of the United States by the middle of the Nineteenth Century. The Negro and the Indian had been adjudged inferior beings for whom there was no hope of improvement. Slavery or death was to be their lot. The Anglo-Saxon was believed to be the peak of all humanity, the race representative of the greatest freedom and progress of the world. In the period after the Civil War these ideas were continued but were modified considerably by the new doctrines of evolution which came into prominence.

No other single idea changed the course of racialism, and indeed all thought in the United States during the last four decades of the Nineteenth Century, as did evolution. Men who subscribed to racialistic doctrines prior to Darwin did not lack generalizations concerning the inferiority of various minority groups but something was needed by way of a theory of causation, a reason why these groups were mentally, morally, and physically inferior. The theory of evolution, and its corrupters, satisfied that want. Some earlier racialists had appealed to the Bible, saying that God had made one group the servants of another because they had sinned and had made them physically distinct to emphasize their differences. This was hardly satisfactory because to refute this theory, the opponents of the racialist had only to cite the seventeenth chapter of Acts wherein the Apostle Paul, on Mars' Hill, told the men of Athens that God "hath made of one blood all nations."

Some appeal to science had been made, but most early scientists of repute had been rather circumspect in speaking of the cause of racial differences and ordinarily attributed them to climate. After the evolutionary theories

had been enunciated and had permeated every level of thinking, the racialist no longer had to be content with simply stating that certain "out-groups" were inferior. He now had an elaborate theory of why they were inferior. Evolution forms a watershed between the racialism of the first and second halves of the Nineteenth Century.

The social evolutionists took biological ideas and attempted to apply them to society. The most commonly used of these ideas was that of natural selection or "survival of the fittest." According to the social evolutionists the original seat of the Aryan race was somewhere in central Asia. As the homeland became overcrowded the bravest and strongest of these people moved out to new areas. As these new homes in turn became overcrowded, again the best of the new breed moved on into still another area. Thus migration acted as a selective factor, each branch of the original group which moved West formed an elite body of people. The culmination of this process was believed to have been reached in the Anglo-Saxons who represented the best of the Aryan race.

The process of selection could be used to the detriment of the race in the opinion of the social evolutionists. An example of this was the effect of the Catholic Church on the Spanish peoples. The social evolutionists believed that by drawing the most intelligent of the Spanish people into the celibate clergy and by killing the most independent thinkers with the inquisition, the church had deteriorated this people.

Another common idea concerning the effect of evolution on a race was that of the "arrested civilization." This theory held that such a society was no longer going through a process of evolution and that it had become stationary long since. This idea perhaps originated with Walter Bagehot who believed that a society became sta-

tionary through insistence of the people upon uniformity, thereby weeding out "varieties" in the population during childhood. Only immemorial custom was tolerated and this same custom was encouraged by the people as being the only shelter from despotism. This process was selective, in Darwinian terminology, and tended to weed out those who would bring about progress. Oriental societies, particularly the Chinese, were believed to fall into this type.

The Negro and Indian continued to occupy a prominent place in American racialistic thinking after the Civil War. Ideas derived from evolution gradually permeated the arguments of writers who dealt with these two groups. But the rationale of racialism had already been so fully developed in these two particular directions that the impact of evolution upon it was less marked than in other realms of racialistic thinking. Old arguments, unconnected with evolution continued to be used throughout the century. The most important changes in the thinking about Negroes and Indians were the result, not of the theory of evolution, but of the changes that occurred in the position of these two groups.

The abolition of slavery by the Thirteenth Amendment necessarily shifted the basis of all discussion concerning the Negro. The defense of slavery was no longer part of the argument. The question was the position of the freed Negro in American society. The South redefined its old attitudes in new terms. It fought bitterly and victoriously to impose these concepts within its own region. And it succeeded ultimately in exporting the new rationale to the North.

As the Civil War ended, the United States turned with renewed effort to the settlement of the vacant areas of the West and as they did so the Indian wars flared anew. There was a considerable movement, led by Helen Hunt

Jackson, for a more humane treatment of the Indian but most of the Army officers who were sent to fight the Indians believed they were incapable of being civilized and recommended that they be exterminated. The propaganda against the Indian, for the most part, came to an end when his land had been taken and when he was rendered militarily impotent. The tradition of Indian inferiority was less enduring than racialistic thinking concerning other groups. This is demonstrated by the lack of stigma attached to having Indian blood. The Indian blood of Will Rogers, for example, did not prevent him from becoming one of the best loved figures of the entertainment world and Charles Curtis, Vice-President of the United States, found Indian blood to be a political asset.

The Negro and the Indian were an old story to Americans. In the second half of the Nineteenth Century a new group, the Chinese, began to figure in racialistic thinking. The principle locus of discussion, of course, was California. But the ideas which were being expressed concerning other minority groups in other parts of the country were applied and elaborated with respect to the Chinese. And the agitation made its contribution to the national stream of racialistic thinking.

The Chinese began to arrive in California shortly after the gold rush in 1849. For a time they were welcomed as hard-working additions to the population. Within a decade, as larger numbers of them began to reach California, there began an agitation against them which eventually resulted in their exclusion from the country. Racialistic ideas were only one of the arguments against the immigration of the Chinese. They were often accused of being unclean, carriers of disease, vice-ridden, and idolators, and were said to be degrading to American labor. Evolution came into effective use as a weapon of propaganda against the Chinese. On the one hand it was urged that they were an inferior race because their evo-

lutionary process had been halted. On the other it was declared that the American Anglo-Saxons could not compete with them in a process of natural selection because the Chinese could survive on much less than the American. They were compared to the Canadian thistle in a field of clover. The thistle always crowds out the useful clover. Before the end of the century Chinese immigration had been effectively halted.

Anglo-Saxonism gained a new impetus in the later Nineteenth Century from the application of the evolutionary ideas. And the coming of the so-called "new immigration" gave particular virulence to ideas which discriminated between the Anglo-Saxon and the other peoples of Europe. Besides the injection of evolutionary ideas into the argument, another significant difference between the earlier Anglo-Saxon doctrines and those of the later Nineteenth Century should be noted. Racialists had previously conceived the great struggle for world domination to be between the Anglo-Saxon and the Celt or Latin. By the end of the century the world situation had seemingly changed so that it was believed that the great struggle for world dominion was to be between the Saxon and the Slav. It was asserted that the Celt had so exhausted himself that there was no danger from the race.

These new ideas concerning the Anglo-Saxon were used as propaganda against the immigration of the people of Eastern and Southern Europe who began coming to the United States in great numbers only after the Civil War. It was believed these people were racially incapable of self-government and that they would destroy the political system of the United States. The evolutionary ideas concerning race were also brought into play as arguments against social reform. It was asserted that better hous-

ing, better food, and the prevention of disease among the lower elements of the population tends to preserve the unfit and thus to lower the quality of the race. The third, and major, use of of Anglo-Saxonism was in the interest of imperialism. The Manifest Destiny idea which had come into prominence at the time of the Mexican War was extended to a global basis. It was believed that it was the destiny of the United States and the Anglo-Saxon race to conquer the world. It was held that this expansion was not only the right but the duty of the United States. Since the inferior native peoples over the world were incapable of developing a civilization of their own, it was believed to be the duty of the Anglo-Saxons to impart to them as much of the benefit of civilization as they were capable of receiving.

These were the racialistic ideas which developed in the United States during the Nineteenth Century. The materials used in this study were largely literary—Nineteenth-Century books and magazines. Fiction and newspapers, both likely sources, were largely ignored. The author endeavored to eliminate moral judgements against the men who formulated these theories because he believes that such judgements are not the business of the historian. It is hoped the study will contribute to the understanding of modern racialism.

VITA

Donald Fred Tingley was born on March 13, 1922, in Marshall, Illinois. After graduating from Marshall Township High School in 1939, he attended Eastern Illinois State College during the school year 1939-1940. From July, 1940, to February, 1942, he was employed by the Carnegie Illinois Steel Corporation in Gary, Indiana. He attended Eastern Illinois State College from February, 1942, to June, 1943, when he was called to active duty with the United States Navy. Upon his release from the Navy in March, 1946, he returned to Eastern State College and was graduated with the degree of Bachelor of Science in 1947. In June, 1947, he entered the Graduate College of the University of Illinois where he was granted the degree of Master of Arts in 1948. He held a Teaching Assistantship in the Department of History from September, 1948, to February, 1952. He was married to Jeanne Cress in May, 1944.